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Significant Others: Security and Suspicion in Chinese–Angolan Encounters

Cheryl Mei-ting SCHMITZ

Abstract: The sense of mystery around Chinese presences in Angola impels researchers to understand not only the empirical details of economic transactions and diplomatic partnerships but also the various ways in which the actors involved make sense of a novel social, political, and economic configuration. By drawing several ethnographic portraits of the social practices and discursive strategies at play in Chinese–Angolan relations, I show how, in a context of mutual uncertainty and suspicion, appeals to "security" play a central role. Instead of viewing Chinese and Angolans as two separate groups with opposed interests and lack of communication between them, I explore how participation in a shared context generates common modes of explanation. Moreover, I propose a parallel analysis of state-level negotiations alongside everyday social encounters to consider how a political economic partnership between China and Angola is lived through the everyday negotiations of Chinese and Angolan residents in Luanda.

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Keywords: China–Angola relations, security, criminality, migration

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Introduction

> The emigrating portions of the Chinese people come from a relatively minute area in the provinces of Kuangtung and Fukien, but wherever they go, […] we never hear that they fail to adapt themselves with wonderful and immediate success to their environment, whatever it may chance to be. What we do hear, however, is that their adaptation is so quick and so perfect, their industry and their economy so in excess of those of the natives of these lands, their solidarity and their power of mutual cohesion so phenomenal, that it is necessary for the security of the remainder of the human race that "the Chinese must go!" (Smith 1894).

On 25 August 2012, 37 Chinese nationals, flown directly from Luanda, Angola, deplaned at Beijing Capital Airport. Dressed in identical uniforms of black shorts and white T-shirts, handcuffed and with balaclavas covering their faces, the men descended the aircraft stairs like fragile marionettes, carefully guided by the gloved hands of policemen flanking each on both sides. According to media reports, these so-called gangsters had been involved in a number of crimes in and around Luanda, including extortion, armed robbery, kidnapping, and running prostitution rings (*BBC News* 2012; Conway-Smith 2012). Narratives in English, Portuguese, and Chinese equally appealed to orientalist stereotypes of a Chinese mafia, in some accounts claiming evidence of the individuals' connections to a gang from Fuqing County, in the southern Chinese province of Fujian (*Club-K* 2012; *Jornal de Notícias* 2012; *Chinese in Angola News* 2013; Qin 2012). The stories that circulated around this sensational event shared an overarching message: despite heightening tensions and the unforeseen consequences of an increasing Chinese presence in Angola, the Chinese and Angolan states had everything under control.

The extradition procedure followed an agreement signed in April 2012 between the then Angolan minister of interior, Sebastião Martins, and the Chinese minister of public security, Meng Jianzhu, to jointly combat organized transnational crime. The meeting revealed an updated estimate of the Chinese population in Angola – from 70,000 to 259,000 – making the Chinese the largest non-African population in the country. The Chinese government had agreed to send police officers to assist their Angolan counterparts in tackling increased criminality among Chinese migrants (Angop 2012a; *SAPO Notícias Angola* 2012). A special team of Chinese investigators began a

criminal investigation in Angola in May, and in July and August, more than 400 Angolan and Chinese police officers carried out what Chinese state media called the "first operation against crimes targeting Chinese people in Africa" (*Xinhua* 2012). Several reports issued by the Chinese Ministry of Public Security hailed its success: the breaking up of 12 criminal gangs, the freeing of 14 victims of sex trafficking, and the arrests of dozens of suspects in Angola along with their alleged accomplices in Fujian and Anhui provinces. These documents described the suspects as having committed crimes against "Chinese citizens" and applauded the successful cooperation between Angola and China at yet another level "to ensure the security of Chinese living abroad" (Guo 2012a; see also Guo 2012b and Xin 2012).

Chinese involvement in Angola has become an object of heated debate, both within Angola and abroad, since China emerged as a major financier of national reconstruction after the end of the Angolan civil war in 2002. Loan agreements between the Angolan government and several Chinese financing institutions (outlined in further detail below) have facilitated the placement of Chinese companies within the Angolan construction sector and the consequent entry of tens of thousands of Chinese managers, engineers, and migrant workers into the country. At the same time, Angola has become a major supplier of oil to China, second only to Saudi Arabia (Alves 2013), accounting for its current status as China's largest trading partner in Africa (Corkin 2013). A surge in the presence of private Chinese businesses in Angola, including importers of construction products and small-scale manufactures, has occurred in parallel with state-level economic exchanges. While the dramatic increase in the Chinese population in Angola has already evoked "yellow peril" type fears of a Chinese economic and cultural invasion, supported by a corrupt Angolan state, more recent reports of criminality among Chinese migrants in Luanda have given cause for even greater alarm (see Marques de Morais 2011 for an Angolan critique; Park 2009 on anti-Chinese sentiment in South Africa; and London 1910 for a fictional account that typifies early twentieth-century phobic attitudes towards China). In this context of uncertainty about Chinese activity and influence in Angola, the coordinated action of the Chinese and Angolan governments seems designed to instil a sense of security.

Having left Luanda about a month before the extradition took place, I was struck by how media narratives contrasted with the every-

day concerns with insecurity articulated by the Chinese and Angolans with whom I had spoken. Taking this disjuncture as its starting point, this paper[1] analyses how Chinese and Angolan residents in Luanda discussed and understood notions of security (in terms of safety, reliability, and certainty) and its counterparts – danger, suspicion, and uncertainty. China–Angola relations are often analysed from a geopolitical perspective, as a relationship between two states, each with their own constituencies and political-economic interests (however, see Corkin 2011 for an important analysis of how even Chinese government agencies have competing interests). This is the case not only for academic literature or journalism. As I will show below, an understanding that Chinese people are strangers in Angola, and that they are closely associated with the Chinese state, seems to pervade the popular imaginary in Luanda. Admittedly, reducing Chinese–Angolan relations to two "sides" cannot capture the multiplicity of actors and interests involved in the phenomenon under examination. Therefore, while I retain, for analytical purposes, an image of encounter between two groups of people, Chinese and Angolan, I also seek to destabilize this simple opposition in two ways. First, I argue that Angolans and Chinese in Luanda, rather than occupying positions of absolute segregation, inhabit a shared social world – one in which suspicions and concerns with security predominate. Second, by highlighting some significant tensions within the group known in Angola as "the Chinese", particularly between private entrepreneurs and the Chinese state, I indicate how what ultimately appears as a monolithic unity emerges out of fraught negotiations over representation, political efficacy, and economic benefit.

1 My fieldwork was funded by the National Science Foundation and the Center for African Studies at UC Berkeley and institutionally supported during my stay in Angola by Acção para o Desenvolvimento Rural e Ambiente (ADRA) and the Center for Scientific Research and Studies (CEIC) at the Catholic University of Angola. I owe much to the mentors and colleagues who gave insightful comments on earlier drafts: Liu Xin, Mariane Ferme, Gerald Bender, Carlos Nelson, Joshua Craze, David Marcus, Olesya Shayduk-Immerman, Ricardo Cardoso, Gavin MacArthur, and the participants of the Program Point Sud workshop in Dakar. The editors of JCCA and three anonymous reviewers provided critical suggestions without which the paper would have been utterly deficient. My greatest thanks go to those in Luanda who shared their stories, experiences and opinions with me, and who must remain anonymous here. Any errors and misinterpretations are my responsibility alone.

This paper is the result of six weeks of fieldwork, conducted from May to July of 2012 in Luanda. During my time in Angola, I conducted informal and semi-structured interviews with employees, managers, and owners of Chinese private and state-owned businesses, as well as business partners, neighbours, critics, and casual observers. A total of 21 individuals were interviewed, and many more were engaged in conversation. (In the text, formal interviews are referenced as "Interviews", while occasional conversations are referenced as "Personal communications".) The aim of my fieldtrip was to understand mutual perceptions of Chinese and Angolan residents of the city. I found that much discussion with Chinese respondents centred on their experiences as migrants in Angola, while many comments from Angolan respondents involved their evaluation of Chinese presences in the country. In addition to these conversations, I chose to include readings of popular media, along with my own experiences and reflections over the course of my fieldwork, as part of my ethnographic analysis. This approach and the interpretation that follows are naturally limited, but the hope is that they might raise new questions in the ever-growing debates around Chinese activity in Angola, and perhaps elsewhere on the continent.

A Puzzling Presence

> "Chinese puzzle" (definition):
> (1) an intricate or ingenious puzzle
> (2) something intricate and obscure (Merriam-Webster Dictionary n.d.).

Though China has had a complex relationship with Angola since the anti-colonial war and has enjoyed official diplomatic relations with Angola since 1983 (Campos and Vines 2008: 2–3; Malaquias 2012: 37), for most observers of Chinese engagement with Angola, 2002 marks a critical turning point. The year in which Angola's 27-year civil war came to an end coincided with China's "going global" strategy, initiated in 1999 with the goal of internationalizing Chinese firms (Salidjanova 2011). Prioritizing post-war national reconstruction, the Angolan government decided not to accept International Monetary Fund financing and its accompanying conditionalities in favour of credit lines from Chinese institutions, which would be guaranteed by regular sales of oil and repaid at a relatively low interest rate over a

generous term (Corkin 2013). In 2003, the Angolan Ministry of Finance and the Chinese Ministry of Trade signed a "framework agreement" stipulating the terms of these loans, and the first 2 billion USD financing package for infrastructure construction was approved in March 2004 (Tan-Mullins, Mohan, and Power 2010: 868). Under the terms of loan agreements from China Exim Bank (the largest creditor), 70 per cent of infrastructure construction contracts are awarded to Chinese companies, which tend to import their own short-term contract labour (Corkin 2012: 45–47). This may account in large part for the high volume of Angolan visas reportedly issued to Chinese citizens – 116 per day during the last six months of 2012 (AFP 2013).

In parallel with the state-driven cooperation outlined above, and especially after the establishment of the Forum for Economic and Trade Cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking Countries in 2003, private Chinese companies have gained increasing prominence in the private housing and construction materials sectors (Fernandes 2012: 77–79). Though Liu (2012) has shown that various other factors served to promote the idea that the Angolan market was attractive to many Chinese entrepreneurs even prior to the end of the civil war, the participation of Chinese companies and workers in Angolan infrastructure construction has undoubtedly contributed to an increase in private Chinese individuals arriving in Angola through networked migration. Chinese small-scale retailers and wholesale distributors currently have operations in many of Luanda's major markets, and the unofficial estimate of the Chinese population – which I heard repeatedly during my fieldwork – is 300,000 (see also McNamee 2012: 27). A recent public statement from the Chinese ambassador to Angola, Zhang Bolun, reports over 50 state-owned and 400 private Chinese companies "involved in Angola's national reconstruction" (*Macauhub* 2010). If these numbers do not include Chinese companies operating outside the construction sector, the total figures for Chinese enterprises in Angola must be much higher.

Scholars and critics alike have emphasized the agentive role of President José Eduardo dos Santos and his inner circle in manipulating Chinese credit lines to their benefit (Brautigam 2009: 152–153; Marques de Morais 2011, 2012; Power 2012; Corkin 2013). This is perhaps most contentious in reference to loans from China International Fund (CIF), a Hong Kong-based financing institution with

close connections to the Chinese and Angolan states (see Levkowitz, McLellan Ross, and Warner 2009; Weimer and Vines 2012 for more detailed discussions of CIF in Angola). CIF's operations in Angola are perceived as being both especially obscure and tightly controlled by the president. It has been reported that Dos Santos himself stated that three million Chinese could migrate to Angola (Nyíri 2010: 43). The president and his elite network are viewed as responsible, directly or indirectly, for the sudden and rapid influx of Chinese workers and entrepreneurs into Angola. The presence of these migrants, in turn, is often taken as evidence of corrupt dealings between Angolan and Chinese political and economic elites. As credit lines from three different Chinese banks now amount to 15 billion USD (RNW 2011; Angop 2012b), sceptics continue to wonder how ordinary Angolans will fare in this "marriage that seems like it will last" (Viage 2012).

While academic debates are often concerned with measuring the effects of Chinese–Angolan entanglements in precise cost-benefit terms, popular discourse in Angola expresses a more general mystification with regard to China. An image of the Chinese flag imprinted upon a wooden tangram puzzle, with several pieces missing, graced the cover of the June 2012 issue of *Rumo*, an Angolan business magazine. Emblazoned over a background of red silk, the cover story read, "The Chinese Puzzle in Angola", enticing the reader with "analysis about what China wants from us". The opening sentences of the lead article elaborated that:

> China gains power in all provinces and sectors of the Angolan economy, but it is in Luanda that the Chinese advance is felt most. From the large conglomerate to the small business of the street vendor, even in the slums, there is Mandarin on every street (Viage 2012: 27).

A photograph of a Chinese construction worker standing firmly atop a railroad car reinforced this presentation of China as both enigmatic and invasive. Wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat and sunglasses that seem to signal both modernity and mystery, he is raising one gloved hand in a greeting as friendly as it is triumphant. Images of Chinese inscrutability, coupled with the militaristic language of an "advance", should be familiar to any observer of anxious discussions in Europe or North America around China's rising economic and political status. In this case, an emphasis was placed on the extent of Chinese permeation, measured in both scalar ("from the large conglomerate

to the […] street vendor") and spatial ("even in the slums", "on every street") terms. Moreover, the widespread presence of the Chinese language, unintelligible to most Angolans, was held up as evidence of the extent of the "puzzle", while also pointing to the need for a solution or translation.

The puzzling quality of Chinese presences in Angola was highlighted in conversations with some of my first contacts in Luanda. These were mostly highly educated Europeans and Angolans working for non-governmental organizations – people who had long-term political and personal commitments to social justice issues in Angola but limited engagement, professionally or otherwise, with local Chinese communities. As one development worker explained, "We don't know much about them because they tend to always stay together in a big group" (Personal communication 1 2012). An NGO employee commented similarly on this distinctive and mysterious quality of "the Chinese".

> There is something very specific about the Chinese. At least in Angola, other foreigners – Portuguese, Cubans, Soviets, even Filipinos – they are likely to eventually intermarry with Angolan women. But it is very rare to see this among the Chinese. If a Chinese man is with a woman, she will usually be Chinese. And also, all over the world, there are Chinatowns. You don't see a Spanish town or a Portuguese town or other closed communities. I wonder why it is this way (Personal communication 2 2012).

A marriage between China and Angola without marriages between Chinese and Angolans seemed very curious indeed, and this commentator pointed to the perceived distance between the two groups despite their intimate economic ties. While his comments reflect the empirical reality of Chinese labour practices in Angola, where large groups of monolingual Chinese workers often reside in isolated compounds on the worksite, they also recall tropes of Chinese insularity and ethnocentricity that have been in circulation since at least the nineteenth century. The idea that diasporic Chinese continue to maintain strong, bounded social networks instead of "integrating" into their host societies has often been seen in connection to both the supposed inscrutability of Chinese people by Westerners and their perceived economic success (see quote by American missionary Arthur Smith, above). Ideas that Chinese migrants are resistant to integration, exclusive by nature of socio-economic position or assumed

cultural superiority vis-à-vis the host society, cannot simply be dismissed as negative racial stereotypes (see Nonini and Ong 1997 on how such tropes are redeployed by Chinese and Western actors, including academics). Indeed, what is interesting in the case of contemporary Angola is how the combination of large numbers, segregation, and lack of communication contributes to an imaginary of "the Chinese" as a palpable, yet enigmatic presence in the daily lives of Luanda residents. From the perspective of non-Chinese in Angola, three questions seem to lie at the core of the puzzle: Who are the Chinese in Luanda? What do they want? And why do they not talk to us?

Marco (the names of all interlocutors have been changed), an employee of a self-defined human rights organization, spoke with me at length about perceptions of the Chinese presence in Luanda. He was from Portugal but had been living in Angola for several decades. When I told him I was doing research with Chinese residents of Luanda, he remarked on their ubiquity and the social effects thereof.

> You can see many of them building the roads here, in this area. They are working all over the place. And now they are opening shops and even selling things on the street. I don't think the perception of them is very positive among Angolans, because they come here to do work that Angolans can do, like driving trucks, performing manual labour, or selling things on the street. Some of those [Angolan] street vendors are living day to day, trying to sell something during the day in order to have food to eat at night, so they really don't appreciate Chinese coming and competing with them. But also I don't think most Angolans know that the Chinese workers actually live in very bad conditions. Some of the conditions you wouldn't believe: the kinds of beds they sleep in, the kind of food they eat. And they work very hard too. I don't think most people realize that (Personal communication 3 2012).

In contrast to more polemical views against Chinese economic competition, Marco presented a self-consciously "balanced" view, evidencing his humanitarian concerns for suffering on the part of both Angolans and Chinese. While he, on the one hand, noted the challenges of Angolans struggling to compete with Chinese for employment and business, on the other, he also expressed sympathy for Chinese workers, the unsung victims of capitalism. For Marco, the problem was not one of exploitation, but of ignorance due to a lack of communication. "There are many barriers between Angolans and Chinese", he lamented, "and language is a major one".

The perception of an insurmountable language barrier between Chinese and Portuguese constitutes a central piece of the "Chinese puzzle", and it seems to have persisted despite the quite proficient Portuguese of many Chinese workers, investors, and entrepreneurs. Beyond contributing to a sense of incomprehensibility, the idea that Chinese-speakers did not and could not speak Portuguese was sometimes linked to a more general characterization of Chinese people as fundamentally self-interested. As an Angolan student told me:

> the Chinese have a language problem. They cannot speak English or Portuguese. They only speak their own language. It's because they are not very open-minded. They only think about themselves (Personal communication 4 2012).

In this comment, an unwillingness or inability to communicate indicates an attitude of immoral self-interestedness, one of the common accusations levied against Chinese economic activity in Angola and in Africa more generally.

Suspicions about Chinese financing and Chinese people in Angola were further revealed through the circulation of rumours. The medium of rumour seems to be one way in which the contradictions and uncertainties of Chinese and Angolan coexistence are made intelligible; though the notion that "Angola is a land of rumours" attests to the extension of this phenomenon beyond discourse on China (Loken 2009: 61). During my fieldwork, I was repeatedly told, usually in a hushed voice, that manual labourers from China are actually prisoners serving out their sentences in Angola – a common theory in other African contexts (Yan and Sautman 2012). One oil company employee told me he thought the rugged appearance of Chinese construction workers and their military-style uniforms made them look like prisoners (Personal communication 5 2012). Another acquaintance more confidently divulged that he had seen Chinese workers being led inside of a shipping container at the end of their shift, implying that they must have been prisoners who were forced to sleep in a cell-like structure. "Prisons in China are full", he said, "so they have to send prisoners here to serve part of their sentence" (Personal communication 6 2012). The day after I heard this, I happened to meet with a manager at one of the larger Chinese construction companies, who laughed when I told him the story.

> That is completely ridiculous! Our company also uses shipping containers to provide accommodations for workers on the con-

> struction site. We usually house two workers per container, and we equip the interior with everything they need. Each has a bed and a desk. There is air conditioning and a place for their computers and an Internet connection. So when people say they saw workers go into a container, is it because they are prisoners? No, it is because there is air conditioning inside! (Interview 1 2012)

The manager with whom I spoke had a vested interest in protecting his company's image, as well as that of the Chinese state; in subsequent interactions, he presented his particular firm as superior to other Chinese firms specifically in terms of workers' benefits and living conditions. That said, there is thus far no empirical support for the theory that the Chinese state exports prison labour to Africa or anywhere else; it has been argued that such ideas originated in Western media criticisms of China (Yan and Sautman 2012). However, the rumour's lack of verifiability is irrelevant as long as it continues to have social and political effects. The seemingly inhuman labour practices and living conditions of Chinese manual labourers are more acceptably rationalized by the rumour of prison labour than by essential differences in Chinese and African work ethics. Moreover, the rumour serves as a way of voicing anti-Chinese sentiment, whether inspired by perceived Chinese disregard for human rights or the pressure of economic competition (Yan and Sautman 2012: 9). This is not to say that the rumour of Chinese convict labour dissolves the mysterious quality associated with Chinese presences in Angola, or that it resolves an apparent contradiction between widespread unemployment and poverty, on the one hand, and the continued enrichment of Angolan and Chinese elites, on the other. Rumours "reveal wider terrains of belief and theory, of alternative visions of cause and effect", and their historical value lies in their capacity to reveal rather than resolve contradictions (White 2008: 81–82). In the case of Chinese activity in Angola, a rumour about Chinese labour indicates the deep tensions underlying an inextricable political and economic relationship.

Chinese as Reliable Pirates; Angolans as Dependable Thieves

With the obscurity surrounding "the Chinese" continuing to pervade the discourse of non-Chinese in Luanda, Chinese residents of the city

similarly experience insecurity in relation to their environment. At the same time, Chinese and Angolans participate in relations in which they willingly rely on the very people they claim to distrust. Rather than asking whether Chinese activity is good or bad for Angola, then, I propose an analytical framework that can account for "simultaneity or contradiction as stable conditions" (Roitman 2004: 45). In contemporary Angola, what has been designated as a relational mode of conviviality between state power and citizen-subjects (Mbembe 2001) extends to include the figure of China and "the Chinese". Everyday encounters between Angolans and Chinese reveal a fraught relationship in which reliance and resentment coincide, and responses on all sides involve a "double act of both distancing and domesticating" that is "not necessarily the expression of a fundamental conflict between worlds of meaning which are in principle antagonistic". In this context, conflict and collaboration are not mutually exclusive and must both be seen as part of the condition of "having to share the same living space" (Mbembe 2001: 109, 104). While elements of both familiarity and strangeness are inherent in relationships between Chinese and Angolans, I argue that despite language barriers and other obstacles to communication, the issue is not one of incomprehensibility so much as competing strategies for making sense of a new political, economic, and social configuration. Articulations of security and suspicion in everyday discussions indicate that China and "the Chinese" are situated within a wider social atmosphere of partial and overlapping dependence and distrust that is handled by social actors in identifiable ways.

A few days after I arrived in Luanda, Pedro, a local high school teacher, and his cousin, Geraldo, gave me an evening tour of the city. We inched painfully through rush hour traffic, a mix of popular US hip-hop blasting from their Ford SUV. The cousins pointed out several buildings that told me a version of the city's history: the colonial-style pink and white Angolan National Bank, built by Portuguese architect Vasco Regaleira during the prosperous 1950s; the glass and steel headquarters of Sonangol, the state-owned oil company, complete with helicopter landing pad; and the glittering CIF Luanda One skyscraper, home to China International Fund. We drove down the length of the Ilha – Luanda's beach-lined peninsula dotted with upscale restaurants, nightclubs, and hotels – stopping at the end to enjoy the sea breeze and look at the blinking lights of ships scattered in

the bay. It was around 8 p.m., but a construction site next to us remained fully lit. "Those are the Chinese", said Pedro. "They never stop working".

In contrast to the more tentative characterizations outlined above, Pedro seemed confident in his assessment. He was trained as an engineer and had ambitions to attend graduate school in the United States. A self-identified intellectual who spoke often of the need to combat corruption and injustice in Angola, Pedro frequently shared his strong political views. And he certainly was not timid in his opinions about Chinese people, which came up that night in a conversation about studying abroad.

> P: First I need to master the English language, so that I can apply to graduate school in the United States.
>
> Me: If language is an issue, why not study in Portugal or Brazil?
>
> P: I need to change languages.
>
> Me: Oh, I see. You want to learn another language. Then what about studying in China?
>
> P: No, no. I cannot study in China.
>
> Me: Why not? There are a lot of Angolan students going to China now. I think there are scholarships available.
>
> P: But I don't want to go to China. I don't really like the Chinese (laughing). They are real pirates (Interview 2 2012).

I asked Pedro to elaborate on this point a few days later, when he offered to drive me to Benfica, a developing neighbourhood on the outskirts of Luanda and the area with the greatest concentration of Chinese businesses.

> Me: What did you mean before when you said the Chinese are pirates?
>
> P: The Chinese are the best pirates in the world! They excel at piracy.
>
> Me: Do you mean that a lot of counterfeit goods are produced in China?
>
> P: Yes. They make fake products, as do the Nigerians. But not only that, when you buy Asian products you don't have security (*não tem segurança*) the way you do with American or European products. Actually I shouldn't say "Asian", because Japanese products

> are reliable. I mean Chinese products. You can't trust them (Interview 3 2012).

Pedro was not the only person I spoke with to express distrust of products of Chinese labour and sometimes, by extension, of Chinese people in general. Over the years since the initial credit lines were opened and Chinese companies began to work in Angola, faults have been found in several Chinese projects, prompting scepticism on the part of many Angolans about the quality of Chinese engineering and construction (Croese 2012: 138). These suspicions became heightened in 2010 when the walls of the Luanda General Hospital threatened to collapse, and all patients and staff had to be evacuated. The hospital had been built only four years prior by China Overseas Engineering Group Company (Brautigam 2011). It became a symbol not only of "shoddy Chinese construction", but also of the perceived corruption inherent in the China–Angola relationship (see Marques de Morais 2011). The poor quality of Chinese products and construction works was thus seen as intimately connected to greed and a lack of transparency in Angolan government and business structures. In daily conversation, however, attributing material dangers to Chinese origins often masked the intricacy and obscurity of the relationships involved. The point was brought home to me in a rather crude joke, which I paraphrase here.

> I heard once about a young woman who wanted to have a child with a Chinese man. Her mother warned her that this would be a bad idea, but the girl insisted. Eventually she got pregnant by a Chinese guy, but the child died only a few weeks after it was born. When the girl cried to her mother, the mother scolded her, "See? I told you that Chinese works [*obras*] don't have quality!" (Personal communication 7 2012).

The Portuguese word *obras* refers to construction projects, and the joke attests to the visible presence of Chinese companies and workers in the construction sector in Luanda, as well as the controversy surrounding their work. In the periphery of Luanda, of which Benfica is a part, Chinese firms dominate the private construction sector, and a host of Chinese restaurants, supermarkets, karaoke parlours, and brothels have sprung up to serve the managers and employees of these companies. The reason Pedro was taking me there was because he had business contacts with employees of Chinese construction firms there. In addition to working as a high school teacher, he had

side businesses in real estate development and knew the area well. What he had not told me during our first conversation about Chinese "pirates" was that he often worked with Chinese subcontractors and suppliers of construction materials. Thus, another difference between Pedro's position and that of the professionals mentioned above was his direct experience with Chinese companies and individuals. As we drove down unpaved roads, past lot after lot of fenced-off, newly purchased property, Pedro surprised me by saying that he often employed Chinese labourers on his own projects because, according to him, they were more reliable.

> With Angolan workers, you can never be sure. They might take the money and run away. You never know if they will show up for work the next day. But with Asians [Chinese and Vietnamese] you have security; you can trust them.

Pedro used the same term, "security", and the same phrasing, "*com eles (não) tem segurança*", to describe, on the one hand, Chinese products compared with those of the West, and, on the other, Chinese versus Angolan labour. "Security" in this context indicates reliability or certainty. In Pedro's framing, Angolan workers were unreliable. Chinese workers, on the other hand, could be counted on to show up and perform a task, though the result would be of dubious quality. Even while he employed Chinese labourers himself, presumably without considering his own projects to be poorly constructed, Pedro thought of "the Chinese" as figures of uncertainty due to their products appearing deceptively like an original or ideal standard but usually found to contain crucial defects. His comments, rather than being self-contradictory, highlight the dual nature of Chinese work in Angola. In terms of productivity, it could reliably increase efficiency and capacity, but in terms of production, it tended to generate an unreliable or inferior result. The products of this work, whether retail goods or infrastructure projects, were similarly imbued with both dependability and distrust. As many observers told me, the availability of cheap Chinese goods on the Angolan market meant that poor Angolans had reliable access to commodities like clothing, household items, and motorcycles, basic necessities that they could have never have afforded before the influx of Chinese trade (Personal communication 8 2012). At the same time, Angolan consumers knew that Chinese goods held no guarantee of quality in comparison with products manufactured in Portugal or Brazil. In a remarkable similarity to Ped-

ro's relationship with his workers, Chinese goods seemed to be productive for Angolans despite being generally unreliable.

Pedro's seemingly contradictory statements show how an attitude of both acceptance and rejection infuses the fraught conviviality of Angolans and Chinese in Luanda. In discourse and practice, the treatment of Chinese products and construction works, the two most common points of contact between Angolans and "the Chinese", reveals a specific set of understandings about Chinese work and its results. Thus an interpretation of social relations, as played out in language and practice, can be derived through attention to actors' treatment of objects and places, which stand in a metonymical relationship to the social. "The material world – in which these relations unfold – participates in social processes through its dense, polysemic meanings" (Ferme 2001: 121). In Luanda, the series of metonymic relationships between the material world, Chinese people, and, more generally, China as a political entity reveals how simultaneous dependence and distrust is condensed in a notion of "security" that Pedro and other Angolans deploy at multiple registers. As I will argue below, though, perceptions of security and insecurity were central not only to Angolan understandings of Chinese economic activity but also to Chinese understandings of their Angolan environment.

While for Pedro "security" indicated a guarantee of quality and reliability, the term also carries the more mundane connotation of safety from harm, which is how Chinese entrepreneurs tended to use it. When I began to conduct interviews with Chinese business owners and employees of private companies in Luanda, I would often ask general questions about life in Angola. Quickly, I came to expect a recurring answer: "Security is bad" (治安不好, *zhi'an buhao*). Even before I arrived in Angola, a Chinese embassy worker with contacts in the country had warned me repeatedly to be careful, always using the same phrase (Personal communication 9 2012). The threat of robbery was a dominant theme in the lives of Chinese traders and workers, who tended to include it, alongside dirtiness and disorder, among their chief complaints about Angola. When I asked Wen, an employee of a wholesale distribution company, about her initial impressions of the country, she replied emphatically, "It's so filthy and messy! People in this country are not very good. They like to rob" (抢劫, *qiangjie*) (Interview 4 2012). A worker at a private construction firm told me similar stories about co-workers getting kidnapped by

the police. "Here, the police and thieves are the same", he said. When I asked if the Chinese embassy ever intervened in such situations, he laughed and shook his head, "All the embassy can do is talk, just comfort us with a few words" (Interview 5 2012; see McNamee 2012 for similar comments from Chinese traders interviewed in five African countries; Xiao 2013 on extortion in Nigeria). Subject to repeated extortion by the appointed local enforcers of public order, and with no assistance from representatives of the Chinese state, these migrants defied conventional understandings of Chinese entrepreneurs and workers as representatives of a state-led "invasion". Indeed, far from the Chinese state and private business people working in concerted action and intention, the state's priority in protecting its economic interests in Angola seemed to detract from the security of its citizens.

The degree to which bribery and extortion figure in the daily lives of Chinese business owners and employees was striking, if for no other reason than that a narrative of targeted victimization seemed central to the social imaginary of these migrant entrepreneurs. For most drivers of personal vehicles with whom I had spoken, regardless of nationality, getting stopped by police for no apparent reason was a regular part of life that happened almost daily in Luanda. Most often this involved nothing more than a quick glance over paperwork. If everything was in order, the driver would be allowed to proceed without incident; if, however, the police found any inconsistency, they were entitled to a *gasosa* – a word literally meaning "soft drink" that is also the local euphemism for a bribe. The payment process involved a delicate dance in which various code words were used to avoid direct mention of a cash sum. Chinese entrepreneurs and employees of private businesses almost universally identified payments to police officers, customs officials, and other government representatives as the greatest difficulties of living in Angola. Most often, these were described as "tips" (小费, *xiaofei*), given to the police when they visited Chinese businesses under the pretence of conducting inspections. In the most severe instances I heard about, police would show up at Chinese-owned shops, arrest the owners without looking at their paperwork, and hold them at the nearest station until a relative or friend arrived with the requisite amount of cash – sometimes up to 5,000 USD (Interview 6 2012).

Privileges afforded by status or wealth did not seem to allow anyone to stand outside the economy of receiving fines and paying *gasosas*. But while white expatriates saw police harassment as an irritating example of the pervasive criminality plaguing life in Angola, Chinese entrepreneurs and workers insisted that they were being racially profiled. "They think that all Chinese here have a lot of money because no Chinese people come here to do anything except business", explained Wen (Interview 4 2012). The Luanda police chief, Jorges Bengue, made a similar assertion in a 2011 interview, when he explained violence against Chinese residents.

> The Chinese have a habit of moving around with bundles of cash and keeping lots of it at home without security. Thus, they make themselves easy targets (Marques de Morais 2011).

But while the image of greedy Chinese businessmen was thought to encourage extortion by police and theft by civilians, Chinese migrants held a mirror image of distrust. "Angolans only care about money", said another shop owner. "As soon as the police see that you have an Asian face, they stop you" (Interview 7 2012). For these Chinese migrants, the impunity of the police was thus understood not as corruption by the Angolan state but as an essential quality of Angolan people. They explicitly described Angolans as having a propensity for stealing even though they worked closely with Angolan clients and employees on a daily basis, effectively depending on them for their livelihoods. The way that Chinese business owners talked about Angolans thus contradicted their reliance on them in practice. This contrast between practical intimacy and discursive distance resembled Pedro's attitude towards "the Chinese", highlighting the difficulty both Chinese and Angolan actors encounter in negotiating the social terrain.

I happened to witness a comparatively mild *gasosa* payment while spending time with Wen at the shop where she sold household goods in bulk to street vendors – a common way for Chinese traders to avoid the complicated and expensive requirements for obtaining a retail licence in Angola (Interview 8 2012). While chatting with Wen, I received a text message and stopped to look at my phone, when suddenly a hand was stuck forcefully in between my face and the screen. It belonged to an Angolan policeman, apparently irritated by my failure to notice his arrival. Wen sighed but continued to smile, joking with the policeman in Portuguese, "I'm hungry too. I want a

gasosa too". The officer ignored her attempt to communicate and add humour to the situation. Instead, he picked up the calculator that was sitting on her desk and typed the number 800, never saying a word. She pressed cancel, pleading that it was too much. At that point, a second police officer appeared. Realizing there was a transaction already underway, he gave an approving thumbs up. The first policeman picked up the calculator again and entered 500. This time Wen reached into her pocket and pulled out a 500 AOA bill (5 USD), which she handed to him, smiling nervously the whole time. After the police officers left, Wen explained what had occurred.

> They come once in a while, different ones every time. Some ask for more, some for less. As soon as they come in, I know what they want. They'll say they're hungry and need help to buy something to eat. They prefer to come to us foreigners since they think you're alone in a strange place and afraid of getting into trouble. There's really nothing you can do (Interview 9 2012).

Wen seemed to have resigned herself to the social expectations of the *gasosa* economy, in which she was confined to her perceived status as a wealthy Chinese businesswoman. What was more remarkable was that, despite her statement about Angolans having a propensity for theft, she seemed to place a great deal of trust in her local employees. Lacking a proper business licence, Wen tried to conceal herself by sitting behind a concrete wall in the back of the shop for most of the day. Clients who did not know her personally interacted only with the two young Angolan men who worked at the front of the shop. They were permanent employees of the company owned by her uncle and lived in the same compound with the Chinese migrants who staffed the company's multiple small businesses. Wen said she felt safe in Luanda only because she did not go anywhere unaccompanied by her Angolan employees. Her story thus underlines how Chinese residents of Luanda relate to their environment not as an absolute or inferior other but through a conflicted structure of understanding that includes components of both suspicion and security. Wen relied on her Angolan employees, as Pedro relied on his Chinese workers. For Wen, however, Angolans could be considered both a threat to security and the guarantee of it; for Pedro, Chinese labour was both the source of unreliable products and the assurance of timely production. The notable parallels in Wen's and Pedro's discussions of security indicate

mutual participation in a shared context of uncertainty and some common strategies for making sense of it.

Conclusion: Restoring Security

Security-related tensions between Chinese migrants, Angolan citizens, and the Chinese and Angolan states were thrown into high relief during a courtroom drama that took place towards the end of my time in Angola. Yang, a Chinese shop owner I had met in one of the local markets, called me one night to ask for a favour. His brother had "gotten into some trouble" and had been held in jail for the past year without charges. Yang asked if I could accompany him to the arraignment that would take place the following day to help with translation. On the way to court the next morning, Yang explained that his brother had been arrested with ten other Chinese men, all allegedly involved in the kidnapping of a Chinese businessman in Luanda. He showed me a court-issued document that described the suspects as "probably connected to the Chinese mafia". More than half of the men, including Yang's brother, had no direct connection to the crime but had been apprehended while in the company of one of the main suspects; the imaginary of a Chinese mafia ring seemed justification enough for their detainment. According to Yang, his brother had known one of the main kidnapping suspects as a fellow merchant in the São Paulo market. They were from the same town in China and had therefore gotten to know each other a bit. When they ran into each other at a casino one night, Yang's brother accepted a ride home. As they walked out of the casino, plain-clothes police stopped them, beat them up, confiscated their belongings, and arrested them. Yang had contacted the Chinese embassy several times, but, he complained, they refused to "show their faces" (出面, *chumian*). Like other Chinese business owners with whom I had spoken, Yang felt neglected by representatives of the Chinese government and used the concept of "face" to indicate their concern with self-image.

While Yang and I waited in the courtroom for the judges and lawyers to arrive, we chatted with some other Chinese men sitting nearby. One said he was there on behalf of one of the prisoners. He claimed he had just finished meeting with the judge and had plans to take him out to dinner later. As he handed us a business card, he said we could give him a call if we needed help resolving any problem.

Another young man surprised us by revealing that he had been sent by the Chinese embassy as an observer. He had not had any intention of getting involved in the court proceedings, but changed his attitude once he discovered that I, a US citizen, would be translating for at least one of the defendants. As he made apparent over the course of the day, he was concerned that I would translate too literally, without taking care to protect China's "face". A proper translation, for him, was one that would not damage the reputation of China or the Chinese presence in Angola, but would also properly condemn the actions of this specific group of criminals. After three hours of waiting, the suspects were finally brought in, some displaying visible scars and bruises, which they later said were the result of beatings by prison guards. The judges interrogated each prisoner individually, asking about their role in the crime and their involvement in a Chinese gang that regularly committed kidnappings around Luanda. They questioned them carefully about supposed aliases that were clearly misspellings of Romanized Chinese names. Most of the accused were also asked to remove their shirts to display any tattoos, but none had any. Then, in the middle of the last testimony, the power went out, prompting the judge to adjourn the court and postpone the date of sentencing indefinitely.

It was only a few weeks later that news headlines declared the successful deportation of 37 Chinese gangsters from Angola. Yang confirmed to me that his brother was included among the men, and, importantly, that he would soon be released. Indeed, he was overjoyed at news of his brother's return to China because it meant he would no longer be treated as a criminal (Personal communication 10 2012). The regulation of security in this case was therefore not merely a matter of cops catching robbers and enforcing the rule of law, categories which are already questionable in contemporary Luanda. Indeed, the narrative has important implications for the representational politics of the Chinese state in relation to Angola. Questions of representation and the creation of status categories are central to the way the Chinese government both regulates its population and reproduces its own image through a "state effect" (Anagnost 1997; Mitchell 2006). The Ministry of Public Security reports on the extradition case illustrate this point well. In the official reports, the category of "Chinese citizen" is reserved for victims of criminal acts, while the citizenship of the alleged criminals is not mentioned. Citizenship

therefore becomes not simply a legal status, but a moral one. Even though the extradition proceedings make clear that the suspects are Chinese, this non-naming leaves the accused criminals in "a state of extreme moral, as well as political, ambiguity" (Anagnost 1997: 101). Perhaps because they have failed to embody the moral qualities of the state's ideal self-representation, they are thus relegated to a national non-status. In a situation of both pervasive distrust and illicit cooperation, where exploitation was taking place from multiple directions, the identification and expulsion of a group of criminal actors appeared designed to restore the images of both the Chinese and Angolan states, as well as their strategic partnership, closely associated with the presidency. It may not have been purely coincidental that the efficiently coordinated arrest and extradition of Chinese criminals was announced a mere six days before Dos Santos and the ruling MPLA party were re-elected for another five-year term.

In Luanda, a state-level partnership between China and Angola is widely acknowledged, while most relationships between Chinese and Angolan individuals remain tenuous. That said, I would argue that Chinese and Angolan residents of the city are not bound together in a state of "mutual incomprehensibility" (Pederson, Nielsen, and Bunkenborg 2012). Rather, in response to a shared sense of uncertainty, Angolan citizens, Chinese business people, and representatives of the Chinese and Angolan states use the common language of security to locate sources of tension in specific ways. For Pedro and Wen, the respective objects of insecurity were Chinese as pirates and Angolans as thieves, despite the reliance by both on members of these groups for their livelihoods. For the Chinese and Angolan states, insecurity seems to stem from perceived links to criminality or corruption that would threaten the image and efficacy of a mutually beneficial partnership. Moving between these two scales of interpersonal encounters and interstate relations, rather than focusing exclusively on one or the other, hopefully allows for a clearer idea of how a political-economic relationship between two states is experienced at the level of everyday sociality. For studies of China–Africa relations more generally, it is not enough to accept assessments of cooperation or conflict at face value, or to dismiss such claims as empty rhetoric, rumour, sensationalism, or racism. Instead, it is important to take seriously apparent contradictions in both discourse and practice,

while also considering their underlying significances and potential effects.

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